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The materiality of absence

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The materiality of absence: organizing and the case of the incomplete cathedral

Abstract

This study explores the role of absences in making *organizing* possible. By engaging with Lefebvre's spatial triad as the interconnections between conceived (planned), perceived (experienced through practice) and lived (felt and imagined) spaces, we challenge the so called metaphysics of presence in organization studies. We draw on the insights offered by the project of construction of the cathedral of Siena (1259-1357) and we examine how it provided a space for the actors involved to explore their different (civic, architectural and religious) intentions. We show that, as the contested conceived spaces of the cathedral were connected to architectural practices, religious powers and civic symbols, they revealed the impossibility for these intentions to be fully represented. It was this impossibility that provoked an ongoing search for solutions and guaranteed a combination of dynamism and persistence of both the material architecture of the cathedral and the project of construction. The case of the cathedral of Siena therefore highlights the role of absence in producing organizing effects *not* insofar they take form *but* because of the impossibility to fully represent it.

Key words: Lefebvre, incomplete architectures; space; materiality; absence; medieval cathedral

The materiality of absence: organizing and the case of the incomplete cathedral

“A gothic dream that reached too high” (Van der Ploeg K., *Art architecture and liturgy. Siena cathedral in the middle ages*, Egbert Forsten, Griningen, 1991, p. 159)

1. Introduction

Following the so called material and spatial turns in social studies (Soja, 1989; Dale, 2005), a growing number of scholars has attempted to explore organizations and organizing as tightly connected with various material forms and spaces (Kornberger & Clegg, 2004; Thrift, 2007; Dale & Burrell, 2008; Warf & Arias, 2008). These turns have acknowledged that space is not only about physical material artefacts but also social factors that contribute to organizing practices (Tyler & Cohen, 2010; Taylor & Spicer, 2007; Beyes & Steyaert, 2012).

However, organization literature is not immune from the ‘appeal of the form’ or what is otherwise labelled as ‘metaphysics of presence’ (Knox, O’Doherty, Vurdubakis & Westrop, 2015). Such metaphysics conceives of the material as generating organizing effects mainly because of its ‘presence’ in a space that it contributes to define and

transform. It also implies that organizational dynamism derives from a physical change from one state to another and thus results in overlooking the open-ended and unfolding nature of change (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

This appeal of the metaphysics of presence makes organizational scholars run the risk of viewing dynamism as a *fait accompli* where its “unfolding, emergent qualities (in short: its potential) are devalued, even lost from view” (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002, p. 568). Exploring organizing requires instead an inversion in the theorizing effort, starting from *what makes it possible* rather than from its self-evident presence.

Along these lines, a number of studies has emphasised the processual and open-ended nature of organizational space (Beyes & Steyaert, 2012; Knox et al., 2015) and have explored space beyond its physical and temporal boundaries (Decker, 2014; O’Doherty, De Cock, Rehn & Ashcraft, 2013; Petani & Mengis, 2016). Some of them (e.g. Petani & Mengis, 2016; Knox et al., 2015) have showed that absences (i.e. what is not physically *there* and visible) produce dynamism as they become immanent presences in organizations (i.e. ‘absent presences’ according to Knox et al., 2015).

By engaging with Lefebvre’s spatial triad (1991) as the interconnections between conceived (planned), perceived (experienced through practice) and lived (felt and imagined) spaces (see, also, Dale & Burrell, 2008; Tyler & Cohen, 2010; Wapshott & Mallett, 2011), we argue instead that absences do not need to be anchored to the physicality or ‘plenitude’ of things (be these ordinary objects or material architectures)

to trigger organizational dynamism (as in the case of ‘absent presences’). Rather, we interpret organizing as resulting from ‘present absences’ (i.e. what is not physically visible *and* cannot be represented). This allows us to bring the role of absences into the debate on materiality and space, and explore how they guarantee the simultaneously unfolding and persistent nature of organizing, thereby making *it* possible (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

In order to investigate these issues, we draw upon archival evidence gained outside the familiar ambit of organization theory: the construction of the cathedral of Siena (1259 to 1357). This project involved three groups of actors, namely: the *Comune* (i.e. the office of the town hall, spokesperson for the civic politics and rationalities); the *Opera della Metropolitana di Siena* - from now onwards, the *Opera*, (i.e. the entity overlooking the physical construction of the cathedral, which took care of the architectonical and financial dimensions of the project); and the canons (spokesperson for the ideals of the Church as religious institution). As the paper will show, the cathedral of Siena (left incomplete as illustrated later in Figures 1 and 2) signifies the impossibility of a complete alignment between the civic, financial, architectural and religious representations of the artefact, as conceived by its planners.

Whereas it was not uncommon for Gothic cathedrals to be left unfinished (see, e.g. Tagliaventi, 2009), we were inspired by the incomplete structures of the cathedral of Siena (which are still evident today – see Figures 1 and 2) to explore the theoretical

dimension of organizing in relation to the project of construction of the cathedral and thereby (i.e. by looking specifically into this incompleteness) enrich current theoretical developments on space and organizational dynamism through an historical perspective (see Decker, Kipping & Wadhvani, 2015). In particular, we illustrate the role of what we label here as the ‘materiality of absence’ in making organizing possible.

Given the contested nature of the conceived spaces of the cathedral, when connected to spatial practices and symbols (at the encounter of the conceived, perceived and lived space), they ended up revealing the impossibility for these spaces to be fully represented in the artefact of the cathedral. This impossibility therefore always entailed an absence which provoked an ongoing search for organising solutions and guaranteed the combination of dynamism and persistence of both the material architecture of the cathedral and the project of construction (the *Opera*, for instance, is still a going concern), which in turn remained incomplete.

2. On space, materiality and organizing

A number of scholars have explored organizing in spaces such as hospitals (Halford & Leonard, 2006), universities (Beyes & Michels, 2011), airports (Knox, O’Doherty, Vurdubakis & Westrop, 2008), homeworkers’ spaces (Wapshott & Mallett, 2011), hairdressing saloons (Chugh & Hancock, 2009), virtual spaces (Chudoba & Maznevski, 2000), hyper-organizational spaces (e.g. the skyscraper, the resort and the office-park –

see Zhang, Spicer & Hancock, 2008), and workplaces more in general (Burrell & Dale, 2003; Tyler & Cohen, 2010).

While emphasising the social dimension of space (Dale, 2005; Dale & Burrell, 2008), organization studies have highlighted the role of different *materials* in organizational life (Fayard & Weeks, 2007; Carlile, Nicolini, Langley, & Tsoukas, 2013; Leonardi, Nardi, & Kalinikos, 2012), as well as the entanglement of materials with both the social (Orlikowski, 2007; 2010) and the spatial (de Vaujany & Mitev, 2013; de Vaujany & Vasst, 2014). From this point of view, buildings, factories, offices, and corporate architectures do not merely *contain* organization but “are themselves produced through organization, transported and placed together in one location through organization, set in particular designs and used to form specific sub-spaces through organization” (Dale & Burrell, 2008, p. 2).

In this regard, Knox et al. (2015) highlight a predominant metaphysics of ‘presence’ in managerial and organization studies, influenced by “the appeal of ‘form’ (and by the horrors of ‘non-form’)” (p. 1002). Also, corporate architectures, as headquarters or other landmark buildings, can provide physical and visual stimuli and “merge individual experiences and memories into a collective whole” (Decker, 2014, p. 515).

It follows that further research is needed to understand whether forms of ambiguous spatial experiences “can constitute some kind of ‘empty space’ of ‘freedom and undefined presence’” (Costas, 2013, p. 1483, drawing on Kostera, 2000, p. 3).

2.1. On absence and the metaphysics of the presence

A number of studies has sought to rethink of space as processual, performative and open-ended (Beyes & Steyaert, 2012; O'Doherty et al., 2013). They have attempted to explore organizing and space outside 'clear institutional demarcations' (O'Doherty et al., 2013) and have, for example, searched for 'non-places' (such as spaces of travel and mobility— see Costas, 2013); spaces of remembering and commemoration (Cutcher, Dale, Hancock, & Tyler, 2016; Decker, 2014); meeting arenas or 'free spaces' (Haug, 2013); spaces at the margin or 'liminal spaces' (Shortt, 2015); 'uncanny spaces' (Beyes & Steyaert, 2013); or 'white spaces' of organizing (O'Doherty et al., 2013).

Similarly, Petani and Mengis (2016) have emphasised the temporal interaction between happy spaces of the past (or 'lost spaces') and the attempt to regain or compensate for them when conceiving future plans. In this context, 'lost spaces' produce effects throughout processes of remembering and planning, which are anchored to the physical state of objects (such as the visual state of a demolished theatre, a ruined hotel or a well preserved church). Analogously, Knox et al. (2015) show that airport organization is carried out and evolves against a broad range of 'absent presences', i.e. an ever-expanding number of possibilities that disturb what is deemed real and present and produce effects with their 'absence in advance' (Knox et al., 2015, drawing on Derrida, 2006). In their analysis, absent presences are events from the past and the

future which trigger organizing through remembering and anticipation. For example, the absent presence of *terror* in the airport's organization is objectified (i.e. anchored to particular objects) and expanded through various "materials, agents and spaces" (Knox et al., 2015, p. 1012).

According to Cooper (2007), "invisibility and absence are immanent presences in all acts of human production" (p. 1567). Human acts of production are stimulated by the need of making visible and present something that is actually absent. It follows that presence comes from its *pre-sense*, i.e. what is absent from sense and that triggers human actions in the attempt to become visible (Cooper, 2007).

These studies suggest exploring the interplay between absences and presences, as absence comes to be filled with presence and is, somehow, objectified through different materials (as for the 'absent presences' in Knox et al., 2015). Next, we develop this idea further by drawing on Lefebvre's conception of the spatial dialectic between absence and presence as a way to delve into the processual nature of everyday life.

3. Towards a materiality of absence

As emphasised by Dale (2005), the physicality of materiality (its 'thingness') and its social meanings are effectively fused together within the conception of space formulated by the French social theorist Henri Lefebvre. In his seminal work on *The social production of space* (1991), materiality and sociality are encapsulated and

merged in a ‘spatial triad’, which comprises *perceived* (i.e. practiced through experience), *conceived* (i.e. deliberately planned from architects, designers, engineers, scientists, politicians, etc.), and *lived* (i.e. appropriated through imaginary and symbols) space. The perceived space is related to *spatial practices*, which come from how we move in space during everyday life and which are grounded in physical materials and spaces (such as the paths that we travel to go to work everyday). The conceived space is related to the *representation of space*, as a deliberate construction which embodies the rationalities, intentions and power of its planners, tied to knowledge, signs and codes. It is a powerful means of political control, as ‘the dominant space in any society’ (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39). Lived space is also the *representational space*, tied to symbols and to the meanings that inhabitants give to them. “It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39).

Lefebvre’s theorization of the social production of space, traced through his ‘spatial triad’, has inspired a vast number of studies on the spatial entanglement between the social and the material (see, e.g., Dale & Burrell, 2008; Tyler & Cohen, 2010; Wapshott & Mallett, 2011). However, while emphasising the subjective experience of space and its dialectic with conceived materials, previous studies have regarded both physical objects and sociality as producing effects, or affordances for action, because they are somehow ‘present’ in a space that they contribute to construct, define and transform.

In his work on *La présence et l'absence*, 1980, Lefebvre questioned the metaphysical conception of reality, by reflecting on the dialectical relationships between presence and absence as a way to understand spatial becoming. In his view, there is never absolute presence, since presence never achieves a full plenitude. Presence is searched always *somewhere else*. It is an act of *being*, a momentum, a possibility of a plenitude which is never fixed. Similarly, absence is never absolute, i.e. it never stops to reveal itself as absence.

As soon as representations attempt to fill the void, they reveal the absence of what they try to represent, and therefore make presence to escape. The dialectical play between absence and presence, in Lefebvre's view, is *space*:

“Space thus conceptualized is defined as the play of absences and presences, represented by the alternation of light and shade, the luminous and the nocturnal. ‘Objects’ in space simulate the appearance and disappearance of presences in the most profound way. Time is thus punctuated by presences. They give it rhythm, but it also contains things that are not what they seem, representations that simulate/dissimulate” (from *La présence et l'absence*, Casterman, Paris, 1980 – translated by Elden, Lebas, & Kofman, 2003, p. 56).

This view reveals the dynamic dialectic of absences and presences as a spatial becoming, and therefore its provocative power:

“absence, as a moment, has nothing pathogenic about it. On the contrary: it provokes, it incites. Pathology comes from the cessation of movement, from fixity in absence and

emptiness, from the feeling of never escaping it, a state of nothingness. When every ‘object’ (thing, being, *oeuvre*) is replaced by its ghostly double, when absence disappears through ceasing to appear as such [...] then a pathological state arise” (from *La présence et l’absence*, Casterman, Paris, 1980 – translated by Elden et al., 2003, p. 56).

Given the impossibility for absolute presence (and absolute absence) to be achieved and somehow ‘fixed’ (Lefebvre, 1980), we argue that searching for the entanglement between social and physical presences is not enough if we aim to theorize the unfolding and persistent nature of organizing (or, in other words, its condition of possibility – see Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) beyond any *fait accompli* view of its material forms. Rather, we need to bring absence into the study of space and materiality, searching for what we call here the ‘materiality of absence’. In Lefebvre’s terms, this means to explore the never ‘absolute presence’ or ‘never absolute absence’ of spaces and materials to explain how it invokes and incites. Aiming to capture the ‘materiality of absence’, next we examine the project of construction of the cathedral of Siena.

4. The method

4.1. Research design

Several studies have acknowledged the importance of historical perspective to fully understand phenomena and to sharpen our vision of the present (see, e.g., Kieser, 1994; Clark & Rowlinson, 2004; Decker, 2013; Rowlinson, Hassard, & Decker, 2014; Wadhwani & Bucheli, 2014). Kipping and Üsdiken (2014) have distinguished between

two broad approaches to the use of historical data within management and organization studies. They name these approaches as ‘history *to* theory’, meaning the use of historical data for theory building or testing, and ‘history *in* theory’, where history is an integral part of the theoretical model, as a driver or moderator. Here, we move closer to the ‘history *to* theory’ approach, as we use an historical setting to interrogate the nature of organizing (its conditions of possibility), and this setting is chosen as been particularly suitable for our purpose.

More specifically, we analyse the project of construction of the cathedral of Siena (see Figure 1), “one of the grandest building of medieval Italy” (D’Accone, 1997, p. 15). The Medieval age provides us with an interesting setting for exploring the roles of both verbal and non-verbal signs and symbols, as well as their connection with material practices, in the social production of space. At that time, social space was already affected by the collusion between civic and religious authorities with the abstractions of architectural geometry and logics (Panofsky, 1951). Also grand cathedrals celebrated ‘authority grounded in reason’ (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 256).

“There is no doubt that medieval society - that is, the feudal mode of production, with its variants and local peculiarities - created its own space. Medieval space built upon the space constituted in the preceding period, and preserved that space as a substrate and prop for its symbols; it survives in an analogous fashion itself today. Manors, monasteries, cathedrals - these were the strong points anchoring the network of lanes and main roads to a landscape transformed by peasant communities (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 53)”.

Also, the exterior parts of Gothic cathedrals implied a strong symbolic use during the medieval age through the use of façades and carefully organized surfaces (see Figures 2 and 3), whose purpose was to celebrate the associated authorities “of Church, King and city to the crowds flocking towards the porch” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 53).

Our historical perspective draws on a period of almost one hundred years, from 1259 (when the projects for enlarging the back part of the cathedral started) to 1357 (when decision was made to abandon the ambitious project for the *Duomo nuovo* – i.e. a new cathedral), which allows us to explore both persistence and dynamism in the project of construction over a sufficient span of time. Also, this construction was never completed and its unfinished state is still visible today (see Figures 1 and 2).

[insert figure 1 about here]

Figure 1. The incomplete structures of the cathedral of Siena (the unfinished façade of the *Duomo nuovo*).

[insert figure 2 about here]

Figure 2. The incomplete structures of the cathedral of Siena (the back façade of the cathedral).

[insert figure 3 about here]

Figure 3. The cathedral of Siena (main façade)

4.2. Data sources

Prior works have reconstructed the historical background of the *Comune* of Siena during the 1259-1357 (Bowsky, 1970, 1981; Catoni, 1975; Waley, 1991) and the functioning and organizational structure of the Opera (e.g. Giorgi & Moscadelli, 2001/2002a; 2002b; 2005) at that time. Also, various studies have illustrated the main innovations that have shaped the architecture of cathedral over its different phases of construction (e.g. Ascani, 1997; Lusini, 1911).

We use these studies as our secondary sources to reconstruct the organizing work around the project (Giorgi & Miscadelli, 2001/2002a, 2002b, 2005; Riccaboni, Giovannoni, Giorgi, & Moscadelli, 2009; Moscadelli, 1995/1982), its social and political background (Bowsky, 1970, 1981; Catoni, 1975; Waley, 1991), the main innovations that have shaped the physical architecture of the cathedral (Ascani, 1997; Borgherini, 2001; Lusini, 1911; Carli, 2010; Guerrini, 2002; Seidel, 2002). Also, these studies allowed us to identify the main actors involved in all key decisions in the project and in the management of the *Opera* between 1259 and 1357 (these actors and their relationships are explained later on, in Section 4). Following this analysis, we identified the General Council of the *Comune* of Siena as being the main body taking the decisions on the project¹. Therefore, we then turned to the primary sources and searched for the documents concerning General Council's decisions on the project of construction between 1259 and 1357 (see the list of primary sources in Appendix 1).

The importance of archival sources for organization and management research has been recognised by a growing number of studies (see Decker, 2013, 2014; Rowlinson & Hassard, 2013). These studies also acknowledge the role of serendipity in archival research, related to the fragmented and temporal nature of archival sources (Kipping, Wadhwani, & Bucheli, 2014), documents' state and availability (Rowlinson & Hassard, 2013), and the mediating role of archivists and inventories (Decker, 2013). As argued by Decker (2013, p. 169), "While some degree of selection is usually necessary to deal with historical sources, the criticism of historical narratives has unduly focused on this level, ignoring the fact that this is just one layer of historical methodologies". Fellman and Popp (2013, p. 218) suggest that the approach to large amount of data sources can be informed by the research question, which makes the researchers select certain sources rather than others.

Archival material for this research was derived from the minutes of the meetings of the General Council (*Diplomatico Opera Metropolitana; Consiglio Generale*) between 1259 and 1357. These documents are preserved in the State Archives of Siena and in the archive of the *Opera*, and have been classified and transcribed in their original language by archivists and published by secondary sources (see the list of inventories and transcriptions in Appendix 1). By relying upon modern inventories and transcriptions, we identified 127 minutes pertaining to the project of construction of the cathedral between 1259 and 1357. We concentrated on those minutes concerning the phase of

enlargement of the back part of the cathedral (10 minutes in total, from November 1259 to June 1260) and the phase of construction of the *Duomo nuovo* (22 minutes in total, from February 1322 to May 1357).

In particular, we analysed the personal declarations of the different actors (e.g. governors, citizens, masons and canons) participating in the project, which allowed us to outline their different perspectives on the process of enlargement of the back part of the cathedral and on the ambitious project for the *Duomo nuovo*.

4.3. Data analysis

As emphasised by Decker et al. (2015), “methods need to be understood in relation to the nature of the knowledge one is trying to produce” (p. 31) and given that historical research produces *different* kinds of knowledge there is no one single approach but a variety of methods can be chosen to fit their purposes (see, Rowlinson, Hassard, & Decker, 2014). Among such variety, narrative approaches provide a useful means for the collection and analysis of texts, starting from the description of “the initial state of affairs, an action or an event, and the consequent state of affairs” (Czarniawska 1998, p. 2).

Our narratives here come from the talks of the actors involved in the project of construction of the cathedral, as they were recorded in the minutes of their meetings. But analysing narratives is not just a matter of examining the production of words and

talks. As argued by Czarniawska (1998), “There is more to it than ‘just talking’. [...T]exts are actions (strictly speaking, material traces of such, but they result from action and provoke further action), and actions are texts in the sense that they must be legible to qualify as action” (p. 11). In this context, it is in the researchers’ hands to link the initial state of affair, an action or event, with their consequences. These three elements become meaningful as they are linked together through a plot, that is, “the basic means by which specific events, otherwise represented as lists or chronicles, are brought into a meaningful whole” (Czarniawska 1997, p. 18). Also, the plot is never there already and it does not have to be found by researchers in a rather positivistic manner. Differently, it “must be put there” by researchers (Czarniawska, 1998, p. 2). From this point of view, “narrative represents a way to organize the selection and interpretation of the past” (Musacchio Adorisio, 2014, p. 464; see also Rowlinson, Casey, Hansen & Mills, 2014) and it is one of the possible approaches for integrating the richness of historical context with theoretical interpretations (Rowlinson, Hassard, & Decker, 2014).

Our plot in this paper links the organization literature on space and materiality, with the historical contexts of the project of construction of the cathedral of Siena, the experiences of the actors involved (as narrated by the actors themselves), the incomplete architectures left during the project of construction (still visible today), and our theorizing effort on what makes organizing possible. This approach allows us to build

up the connection between the historical setting and our theoretical interpretation (Kipping & Üsdiken, 2014).

Also, the narrative approach allows us to interpret the minutes of the project beyond their mere role of primary sources of information. Our texts are not merely texts. They are text-as-action (Czarniawska, 1998). This means that they do not merely provide information about our matter of concern but they *are* themselves our matter of concern as they are the means through which the actors involved in the project of the cathedral attempted to represent their ‘conceived space’. As the construction of gothic cathedrals did not normally follow a pre-defined plan or written project design (Borgherini, 2002), talks and narratives were the main means through which planners tried to represent their different rationalities and intentions (‘representations of space’, in Lefebvre’s terms). It is through these talks that actors interrogated their intentions, by attempting to represent them through dialogues and debates. Therefore, our plot here links the narratives of the actors involved in the project to its conceived spaces and contested representations, revealing the gaps in-between these spaces and connecting these gaps to their evolving material effects. This also allowed us to connect the historical context with our theorizing effort. The results of this analysis are reported in the next sections.

5. Building the cathedral

The *Opera della Metropolitana of Siena* was (and still is today) the institution in charge of the construction, ornamentation and maintenance of the cathedral of Siena. In 1259 all key decisions on the project of construction were taken by the General Council of the *Comune* and were implemented under the responsibility of the *operaio* (see Figure 4), i.e. the person in charge of overseeing the project of construction and the overall management of the *Opera*. The *caput magister* (i.e. the head of the masons), the masons and the workers of the *Opera* had to follow the instructions of the *operaio* and his councillors². Although the *operaio* had to report all its activities to the General Council, he had also to swear his obedience to the *pacta* (agreements) between the General Council and the canons of the cathedral, who therefore maintained a voice in the project of construction (Giorgi & Moscadelli, 2005).

As we will see next, the different actors involved in the construction meant that different apparatuses of power came together in the organizing space of the cathedral: the General *Council*, aiming at rendering the cathedral a symbol of political power; the canons of the cathedral, taking care of its religious dimension; the *Opera*, within which the *operaio*, the caput magister and the masons were taking care of the architectural and financial dimensions of the artefact. As we will discuss next, the attempt to represent the different intentions of the actors involved produced material effects no less than the bricks, column and arches of the physical structures of the artefact, within the organizing space of the cathedral.

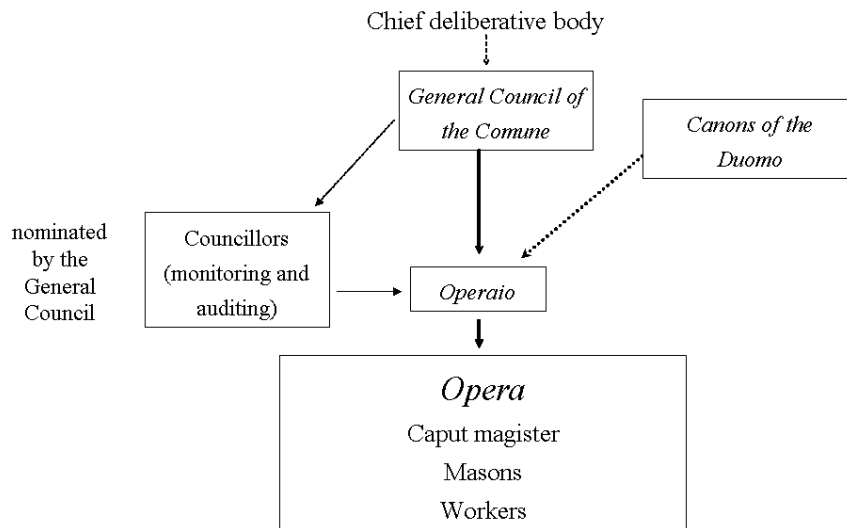
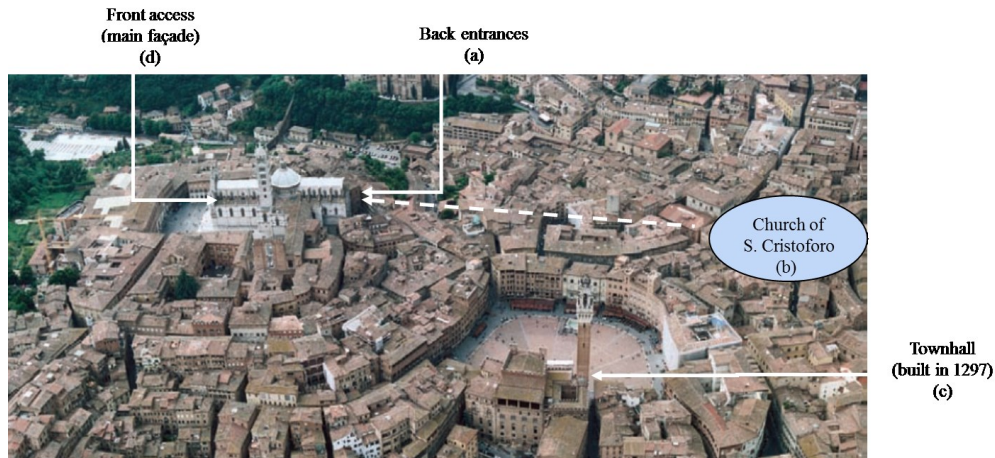


Figure 4. Organizing structure of the Opera.

5.1. On present absences: incomplete rationalities and contested representations of the cathedral

In 1259 the General Council and the canons of the cathedral agreed to enlarge the area of the chorus and of the main altar located in the back part of the cathedral³. To this purpose, an *ad hoc* commission of nine citizens was nominated by the General Council “to see and order what could be best done for the cathedral⁴”. From an architectural point of view, this project required to find a technical solution to sustain the enlarged area by reinforcing the part located under the chorus (Seidel, 2002).



**Figure 5. – The spatial practices for accessing the cathedral
(the path from the church of S. Cristoforo)**

As decisions on the project of enlargement of the back part of the cathedral had to be taken, different representations of the cathedral (‘representations of space’, in Lefebvre’s terms) were conceived by the actors involved in the project. These representations were revealed by the contested narratives of the meetings of the actors involved, which were held in the Church of S. Cristoforo (where all relevant decisions concerning the cathedral, and the administration of the *Comune* more in general, were taken) and were reported in the minutes of the meetings.

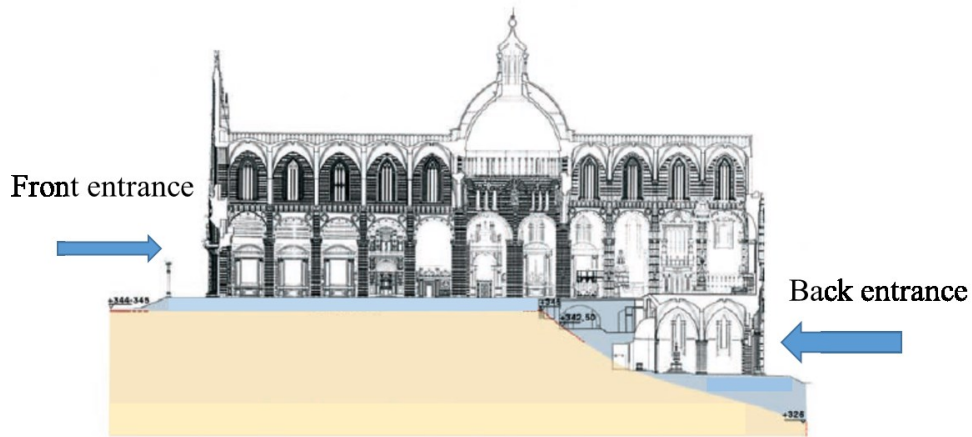


Figure 6. – The front and the back entrances of the cathedral (adapted from Haas & von Winterfeld 2006).

In particular, in the opinion of the *operai* and the canons, the enlarged area of the chorus and the main altar implied to close the back access to the cathedral, located below the enlarged area (see Figure 5 – point a – and the back entrance in Figure 6), so that the architectural stability of the overall structure could be ensured. However, this plan clashed with the conceived space of the General Council members. Their declarations during the project meetings revealed that the new works had to be done following the ‘best possible solution’, but “under no circumstance the [back eastern] doors of the cathedral had to be closed”⁵.

As documented by secondary sources (see Seidel, 2002), the back entrance allowed the members of the General Council a direct access to the cathedral (see the dotted line

in Figure 5) from the street coming from the church of San Cristoforo (and, after 1297, from the town hall, Figure 5 – point c), where the General Council used to meet. By closing the back access, the path from this church to the cathedral would have been longer as it had to proceed to the main entrance (Figure 5 – point d), rather than having a direct access from the back side, behind the main altar (Figure 5 – point a). Also, the back access allowed the General Council members to perform a spatial practice that deviated from the official liturgy, which instead required believers to access the cathedral from the front façade (see front entrance in Figure 6) and proceed to the main altar through the main nave.

Following the request of the General Council, the commission of nine citizen proposed two alternative solutions. According to six members of the commission,

“the altar of the Blessed Virgin and the choir of the aforesaid cathedral and all pertaining to the choir must be built and completed as planned by *the lord canons of this cathedral and by the operai* [emphasis added] of the opera del Duomo, but with the proviso that a certain door at the rear of the said cathedral, namely the one that is now open, must remain open, and that a wall must be built in the church beside this entrance to protect it and to safeguard ingress and egress to and from the said cathedral through that entrance, and also in order to hold the ground leading to the choir of the said cathedral, so that it [the soil] should not slip away or obstruct the said entrance and the access to it [emphasis added]”⁶

Through this declaration the six members attempted to represent their conceived space of the cathedral. Such plan embraced the intentions of the General Council to enable the spatial practices for accessing the cathedral from the back, but left only one door open at the rear. Also, following the need for structural stability, and therefore the architectural dimension of the artefact, a new wall had to be built to ‘safeguard ingress and egress to and from the said cathedral through that entrance’ (as quoted above). This solution attempted to mediate between the conceived space of the canons and the *operai* taking care of the religious and architectural dimensions of the cathedral (‘...as planned by the lord canons of this cathedral and by the *operai*’ – quoted above), and the civic rationalities of the General Council (‘...but with the proviso that a certain door at the rear of the said cathedral, namely the one that is now open, must remain open’ – as quoted above).

A different representation of the cathedral was conceived by a minority of three members of the commission, who suggested that:

“the entire church should be lowered and that the earth should be excavated down to the level of the cathedral square; also that the main entrance to the cathedral, which is at the rear and is presently closed, should be opened and made more serviceable, so that people may go and enter the aforesaid cathedral easily”⁷

This solution fully embedded the politics and rationalities of the General Council, conceiving a sumptuous back access to the cathedral by the means of opening the main entrance at the rear (which was closed at that time) and making it ‘more serviceable, so

that people may go and enter the aforesaid cathedral easily' (as quoted above). The space conceived by the three members of the commission, and the spatial practices for accessing the cathedral from the rear, would have rendered the back part of the cathedral a more evident symbol of the politics of the General Council. However, this solution clashed with the architectural dimension of the cathedral, as it implied to lower down the entire church.

As different intentions came together in the organizing space of the project of construction, gaps in between the conceived spaces of the canons, the *operai* and the General Council were revealed. Rather than filling their void, no representation 'dominated' over the other. Indeed, although the General Council agreed on the first solution proposed by the commission, this solution was never actually implemented (as demonstrated by the subsequent minutes of the meetings⁸), thereby leaving the project of construction unable to fully represent the intentions of their planners. As soon as representations attempted to make the contested rationalities of the project (and the cathedral itself, as a material artefact) 'present', they revealed the absences that they entailed in terms of the impossibility to fully align the multiple intentions involved in the project of construction.

Therefore, the gaps between contested representations left a momentum of 'absence' (Lefebvre, 1980) in the conceived spaces of the cathedral. Far from resulting in a pathogenic state, as in the case of an 'absolute absence' or 'nothingness' (where absence

ends to reveal itself *as such* - Lefebvre, 1980), this lack provoked the search for further solutions, triggering the ongoing dynamism in the project of construction as well as the persistence of the project itself, as we will discuss next.

5.2. *Incompleteness, dynamism, persistence: the Duomo nuovo and the extension of the cathedral*

17th February 1322,

“We also think that one should not go on with the said work because the cupola of the abovementioned church would no longer stand at the centre of the cross after the completion of the new work, as it should reasonably remain. We also think that one should not carry on with the same work because after the work would be completed it would not have the measure of a church in length, width and height, as the rules for a church demand” (Lorenzo Maitani, caput magister of the Opera)⁹

As indicated in this talk, in 1322 Lorenzo Maitani (head of a commission of five masons nominated by the *operaio* and by the councillors) suggested to stop the activities of enlargement of the cathedral for aesthetic reasons, as well as for the instability of the foundations. This suggestion was made on the basis of the visible lack of the ‘right’ proportions (*ratio* and *recta misura*, according to the mason Lorenzo Maitani) from an architectural and liturgical point of view. In his own words,

“We also think that one should not continue further with the work since the old church is so well proportioned and all its parts go so well together in width, length and height that, if something would be added to some part, the unwanted consequence had to be the total destruction of the church, if one wants to rationally reduce it to the proper measure of a church”¹⁰

The declarations reported above revealed the conflicts between different representations of the cathedral. As soon as the conceived space of the General Council attempted to become visible in the physical construction of the cathedral (as artefact), it revealed its gaps with the architectural and the religious dimensions of the project, as conceived by the masons and the canons (“because the cupola of the abovementioned church would no longer stand at the centre of the cross after the completion of the new work, *as it should reasonably remain*”, in Maitani’s words - emphasis added - “as the rules for a church demand”).

Aiming to capture and represent the religious and architectural dimensions of the cathedral, further plans were conceived and revealed in the subsequent meetings for the project. In 1322 the same commission guided by Maitani proposed a different project for a new (and more proportioned) cathedral (“*una ecclesia pulcra, magna et magnifica*” – beautiful, big and magnificent in the quote below):

“we advice that in honour of God and of the Blessed Virgin Mary, [...], a church is begun and made, beautiful, big and magnificent which is well proportioned in length, height and width and in all measures belonging to a beautiful church, and with all splendid

ornaments which belong to and are proper to such a big and such an honourable and beautiful church¹¹”

Through this declaration, the commission of masons attempted to represent their conceived plan, which embodied the architectural (“well proportioned in length, height and width” as quoted above) and religious (“all splendid ornaments which belong to and are proper to such a big and such an honourable and beautiful church” as quoted above) dimensions of the cathedral, as well as the masons’ (and canons’) intension to render the artefact a visible symbol of religious ideals, as confirmed in the talk below:

“our Lord Jesus Christ and his most sacred mother and his highest celestial court may be praised and commended in this church with hymns and that the said city of Siena may be protected by them from enemies and always be honoured¹²”

Despite the opinion of the commission, the General Council rejected Maitani’s proposal. However, the conceived plan of Maitani was never totally abandoned as the lack of aesthetic and structural proportions in the overall shape of the cathedral (an its visible incompleteness) had left the search for further solutions open.

Indeed, on 23 August 1339 the General Council decided a further enlargement of the cathedral within a new project for a *Duomo nuovo*, which was supposed to become the biggest cathedral in the world. As reported in the minutes of the meeting, the enlargement had to consist in a longitudinal structure with a nave and two aisles perpendicular to the south-eastern side of the existing church (which was meant to become only a transept of the *Duomo nuovo*)¹³.

As the actual construction started, new structures were built for the *Duomo nuovo*. However, in 1356, two masons declared (in front of the *operaio* and the councillors) that, to link the new and the old structures, expensive activities of demolition had to be undertaken. These included the demolition of the bell tower, the cupola, the vaults of the cathedral, the hospital of Monna Agnese and part of the Episcopal palace and would have proved been very expensive. As they stated:

“if we want to re-build these structures, it will cost more then 150 thousands of golden *fiorini* and we believe that if we want to carry on the construction of the new church following its proportions and according to the financial inflows of the Opera, it will take more then 100 years. For this reason, after having considered all these points, we believe that the old church should be kept as it is¹⁴”

The declarations above demonstrate the conflicts between the conceived space of the General Council (aiming “to build a new nave and to extend it¹⁵”) and the financial dimension of the cathedral (“according to the financial inflows of the Opera, it will take more then 100 years” in the quote above from the masons’ talk) as conceived by the two masons (“we believe that the old church should be kept as it is” in the quote above).

The plan of the two masons was never followed. Instead, the General Council ordered that the new structure had to be an enlargement of the structures already in place. This choice would have led to the construction of a bigger cathedral, according to the aspiration of the *Comune*. However, once again, the conceived space of the General Council did not dominate over the others. As it attempted to become present, it revealed

the lack that it entailed and which prevented the intentions of the General Council to be fully embedded in the physical artefact. Indeed, as the works of construction attempted to connect the old and the new structures, they created various problems in terms of proportion and stability and some of the structures collapsed.

In 1357 a new commission of masons was nominated by the General Council to offer their opinion on the project of construction. According to the commission, the damages in four columns of the *Duomo nuovo* and the respective vaults were so serious that they had to be demolished to avoid collapses. As declared by one of the masons,

“the reason is that the stones and marble of the column were made without enough basement and with bad filling”.¹⁶

Also, the mason suggested that:

“in my view, [trying to repair the ruined parts] would be more expensive than demolishing and building again the ruined parts”.¹⁷

Following the architectural and financial dimensions of the construction, as conceived by the masons, in 1357 the General Council decided to stop the project for the *Duomo nuovo*¹⁸. However, whereas some incomplete structures were destroyed, parts of the outer walls were left standing and visible in their unfinished state (which persists even today - see Figures 1, 2 and 7) and in the hope to be one day completed. This incompleteness allowed the project of construction to remain open and, therefore, trigger the search for further solutions.

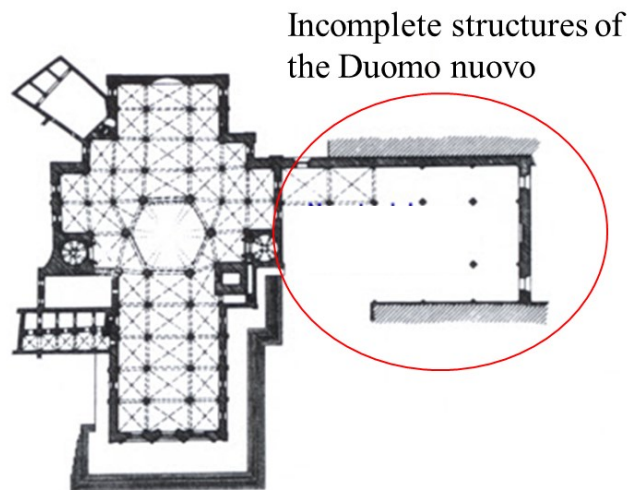


Figure 7 – The incomplete structures of the *Duomo nuovo* (layout)

6. Discussion: towards the materiality of absence

According to Lefebvre (1991), the conceived, perceived and lived space are three moments inextricably linked, which encounter in the social production of space. This encounter does not necessarily imply coherence, but dynamics of disposition and opposition, whose understanding requires a search for what ‘they reveal versus what they conceal’ (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 53). Rather than being represented into physical artefacts, the encounter between the conceived, perceived and lived spaces of the

cathedral revealed the lacks that they entailed, i.e. the impossibility for the different rationalities to be aligned and, therefore, to become fully ‘present’.

For example, it was impossible to align the spatial practices for accessing the cathedral from the rear, according the civic rationalities of the General Council, with the official liturgy (and therefore with the religious dimension of the cathedral), as well as with the need for architectural stability of the artefact. This impossibility meant that, rather than having one representation of space to dominate over the other and, thereby, ‘become present’ into physical structures (as, e.g., in Wapshott & Mallett, 2011, and Zhang et al., 2008), no representation dominated and their lacks appeared *as such* (Lefebvre, 1980), i.e. as absences that could not be filled.

6.1. On present absences and incompleteness

The case of the cathedral shows that the momentum of absence unfolded in between the gaps of the conceived spaces of planners, as soon as they interrogated their contested rationalities and attempted to make them present, linking them to symbols and spatial practices in the encounter in between the conceived, perceived and lived space. But the cathedral (with its religious, civic, financial and architectural rationalities) was impossible to be fully represented (i.e. it was incomplete - ‘incompleteness’ in Figure 8). It was this impossibility that left its material artefact unfinished, and provoked the

ongoing transformation of both the artefact and the project itself (which never achieved closure).

Previous studies have shown that intentions may become ‘solid’ (Decker, 2014) and that conceived spaces and apparatuses of power can be embedded into physical structures which in turn participate in the construction of the collective experience around them. For example, by drawing on the architecture of the cloistered Vasari Corridor in Florence, Burrell and Dale (2003) show how buildings can embed power relationships through closure and separation. Or, they can allow emancipation through openness and transparency (through, e.g., the building properties of glass). Also, in the analysis of banks’ and retailers’ architectures in Ghana and Nigeria, Decker (2014) demonstrates that the ‘meaning’ of architectures depended on the shared memory that evolved around them.

The case of the cathedral helps to show that the multiple intentions that were conceived in the organizing space of Siena’s cathedral could not be fully embedded in its material structure and therefore never achieved a ‘full presence’. In other words, social space was not produced by what the conceived, perceived and lived space revealed and made present. But as multiple intentions were questioned and interrogated by their planners, they revealed the gaps in between them and the impossibility for these gaps to be filled.

The case also illustrates that absence produces organizing effects not only because of the individuals' attempt to compensate, fill or objectify the void as they experience it (as in the 'lost spaces' by Petani and Mengis, 2016, or in the 'absent presences' of terror in Knox et al., 2015). Rather absence produces effects because of the impossibility to fill the void, and the lack that material forms persistently entails, which is left empty from presence (remaining therefore a 'present absence' – Figure 8). This 'present absence' is revealed *as such* (i.e. as an absence that cannot be filled) by any attempt to re-present it. In Lefebvre's terms, it is the attempt to make *it* (the cathedral and its contested rationalities as conceived spaces) present (through representations), that reveals its absence (and therefore a 'present absence'), triggering further spatial becoming, as we discuss next.

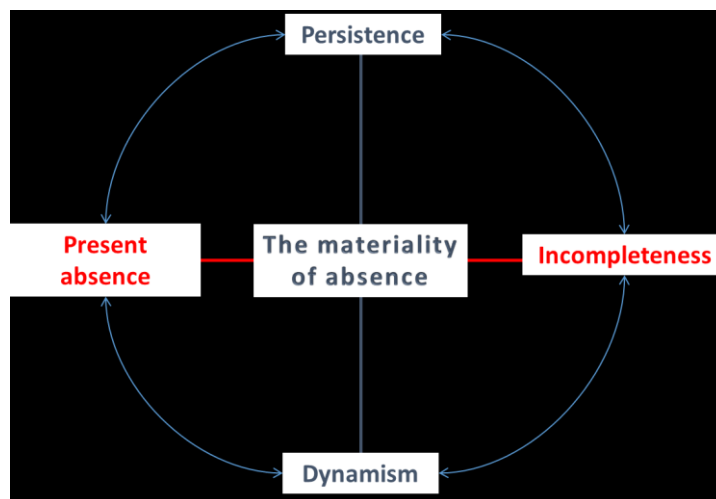


Figure 8. The materiality of absence

6.2. *On dynamism and persistence*

Whereas a more processual approach to Lefebvre's social production of space has been strongly encouraged by the literature to uncover organizational dynamism and spatial becoming (see Taylor & Spicer, 2007; Beyes & Steyaert, 2012), most of previous studies have interpreted this dynamism in light of the domination and appropriation of spaces taking place through different materials because of their 'presence'. As noted by Petani and Mengis (2016), these interpretations tend to frame dynamisms within temporal and physical boundaries, by relating it to already-constructed spaces transformed by organizational practices and users' appropriation.

Here we add to previous studies on the complexities of the conceived space (such as Petani & Mengis, 2016) by showing the role of contested representations of space in provoking ongoing change and transformation ('dynamism' in Figure 8) beyond the interplay of domination and appropriation of space and *because of* the void that apparatuses of power and intentions persistently entail. Had these intentions being mirrored by the cathedral (as artefact) and had a perfect state being achieved (therefore filling their absences), the *Opera* and the project of construction of the cathedral would have stopped unfolding, with no further affordances for actions. Instead, these affordances have been left open. We show here that dynamism did not follow

organizing. Rather it was provoked by present absences, which triggered ongoing search and transformation thereby making organizing possible.

Our case speaks to Tsoukas and Chia (2002) when they stress that dynamism is ontologically prior to organization. It is a condition of possibility. As argued by Shackle (1966) we cannot know what will happen in the future and this impossibility creates a realm of possibilities that do matter for decision-making and action. The realm of possibilities for the construction of the cathedral was sustained by the gaps between the various intentions involved in the project. These gaps did not lead to a 'pathogenic state' in which organizing was simply not possible (Lefebvre, 1980). Nor specific intentions dominated over others, and this fact allowed all possibilities to persist ('persistence' in Figure 8). The project of construction was never completed and therefore never actually abandoned, even when the *ratio and recta misura* for the artefact were leaking. The lack of knowledge about what would have happened (in Shackle's terms the 'non-existence' of a determinate future to be known) left all possibilities open and ensured the persistence of the project. The *Opera* is a going concern still today and the incomplete structures of the cathedral are still there, signifying the persistence of organizing.

6.3. The materiality of absence

This study demonstrates the importance of exploring absence as an integral part of materiality and of the spatial entanglement between organizing and material forms. While we reinforce the idea of the intertwined connection between physical and social structures (Carlile et al., 2013; Dale & Burrell, 2008; Orlikoski, 2007; Dale, 2005), we add to previous studies by challenging the dominant ‘metaphysics of the presence’ (Knox et al., 2015) and we demonstrate that to fully understand spatial and material becoming in organization we need to understand what we call here the ‘materiality of absence’. By building a plot between the contested representations of Siena’s cathedral, the conceived, perceived and lived spaces of their planners (as pertaining to the historical setting of this research) and our theorizing effort (as embedded in the organization literature on space and materiality), we highlight here the need for researching the materiality of absence (the centre in Figure 8). In so doing, we also add to previous studies on Lefebvre’s spatial triad by demonstrating that absences and incompleteness can be researched in the gaps between the conceived, perceived and lived moments of space, searching for what these moments ‘conceal’ rather than ‘reveal’ (Lefebvre, 1991).

A discourse on materiality that aspires to escape the trap of a positivist account of physical and social worlds and overcome the divide between them, needs therefore to start from (and fully take into account) the ontological and epistemological

incompleteness of these two worlds: hence the need for embedding absences in any account of the material (see the centre of Figure 8). Accounting for the materiality of absence requires acknowledging the impossibility of fully defining the boundaries of both physical objects (as they are ontologically incomplete because socially defined)¹⁹ and social domains (as one would risk reifying social actions). It also requires an inversion in the theorizing effort: conceiving of the material from the absence rather than from the fullness of the physical.

We therefore use the term ‘present absences’ to highlight that absence produces organizing effects not simply because, at some point, it comes to be filled with presence, and therefore is somehow objectified (as for the ‘absent presence’ of the object ‘terror’ in Knox et al., 2015), but also because of the lack that material forms persistently entails. This ‘present absence’ unfolds in between the contested representations of the cathedral, as their planners interrogate their rationalities and attempt to make them present. The resulting incomplete artefact signified the impossibility for fully representing the different spaces of the cathedral, so that absence did not disappear or, in other words, did not cease ‘to appear as such’ (Lefebvre, 1980). In this context, the theorization of the material as a spatial endeavor of ‘defining’ objects and sociality (such as the cathedral and its organizing dimension) starts from, and continuously accounts for, a ‘lack’ (an absence and a lacuna, Agamben, 1999)

rather than from a full presence. This incompleteness (of representations) reveals absences *as such*, i.e. as voids that cannot be filled.

This impossibility to achieve a finite and ‘ideal’ state of an object also creates opportunities for theorising its dynamism, as noted by Kociatkiewicz and Kostera (1999). Therefore, it is a necessary theoretical condition for escaping the temptation of treating material objects as real and finite, and for escaping the temptation of black-boxing organisations, organising and its inherent rationalities for, as noted by Callon and Latour (1981), blackboxes always leak.

Also, the incompleteness of the cathedral allowed contested representations and different rationalities to be connected to (and co-exist within) the project of construction, as a necessary precondition for these rationalities (and the project itself) to persist over time, with none of them ever dominating over the others. Persistence and dynamisms of organizing (on the vertical axis of Figure 8) are therefore to be researched in the material effects of present absences and incompleteness, demonstrating how organizing is made possible through the materiality of absence.

7. Conclusions

This paper has sought to explore the dynamic and persistent nature of organizing, how it is made possible through absences and incompleteness, rather than presence and plenitude of things. In so doing, we add to the extant literature on materiality and space

(see, e.g., Taylor & Spicer, 2007; Dale & Burrell, 2008; Decker, 2014; O'Doherty et al., 2013; Knox et al., 2015; Petani & Mengis, 2016). We add to these studies by suggesting that a sociological attention to the material should be prompted by an inversion in the theorizing effort that moves away from a search for the physical presence of the material to explore the emptiness of absences, triggering movements and dynamism that are always open-ended and providing a condition of possibility for (and the persistence of) *organizing* (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002).

We have been inspired here by Lefebvre's conception of space and spatial becoming to build a plot between the organization literature on space, the contested spaces of Siena's cathedral, and the role of absences and incompleteness in provoking organizational dynamism and persistence, thereby accounting for the "materiality of absence" as a way to understand what makes organizing possible.

In line with other works that have explored the role of the not said (see, for instance, Anteby, 2013, on the role of absences in the manufacturing of morals at Harvard Business School), the not representable (see, for instance, Quattrone, 2015 on the role of accounting in making the Jesuits explore what was not possible to make visible), or the absent presences (Knox et al., 2015), we call for a new approach that interrogates absences rather than presences: attaining to presences implies closure, definitions and, to some extent, dogmatism; exploring absences, lacks, misalignment implies openness

towards the other, and the possibility of achieving order by a continuous dialogue amongst never fully defined rationalities.

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Appendix 1 – List of primary sources and transcriptions

<i>Primary sources:</i>
ASS, Archivio di Stato di Siena, Statuti di Siena 2, fol. 1r.; 1v-2r.
ASS, Archivio di Stato di Siena, Diplomatico Opera Metropolitana, 1259/60, 235 (casella 148).
ASS, Archivio di Stato di Siena, Diplomatico Opera Metropolitana, 1259/60, 246 (casella 148).
ASS, Archivio di Stato di Siena, Diplomatico Opera Metropolitana, 1259/60, 309 (casella 148).
ASS, Archivio di Stato di Siena, Diplomatico Opera della metropolitana, 1321/2, n. 667, casella 654.
ASS, Archivio di Stato di Siena, Diplomatico Opera della metropolitana, 1321/2, n. 671, casella 654.
ASS, Archivio di Stato di Siena, Consiglio Generale 125, fol. 18r-19r.

AOMS, Archivio dell'Opera della Metropolitan di Siena, 25(30), n. 4.
AOMS, Archivio dell'Opera della Metropolitan di Siena, 25(30), n. 5.
AOMS, Archivio dell'Opera della Metropolitan di Siena, 25(30), n. 6.
Transcriptions (in original language) of primary sources:
Haas, W.; von Winterfeld, D., 2006: Der Dom S. Maria Assunta. Architektur, Textband (Die Kirchen von Siena: vol. 3.1.1, ed. by Riedl, P. A.; Seidel, M.). Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag.
Milanesi G. (1854), Documenti, Vol I.

¹ The General Council (*Consiglio generale* or *Generale Consilium Campane*) was an assembly of 300 citizens from Siena. It was the chief administrative and legislative body of the Comune (see Waley, 1991)

² Cfr. ASS, Statuti di Siena 2, fol. 1v-2r.

³ This agreement is mentioned in the minutes of the meeting of the Opera held on 28 November 1259 (ASS, Diplomatico Opera Metropolitana, 246, casella 148).

⁴ Minutes of the meetings of the General Council. ASS, Diplomatico Opera Metropolitana, 1259/60, 235 (casella 148). The translation from Latin is ours.

⁵ ASS, Diplomatico Opera Metropolitana, 1259/60, 235 (casella 148). The translation from Latin is ours.

⁶ Minutes of the meeting of the Opera held on 28 November 1259 (ASS, Diplomatico Opera Metropolitana, 246, casella 148), translated by Van der Ploeg (1991, p. 41).

⁷ Minutes of the meeting of the Opera held on 28 November 1259 (ASS, Diplomatico Opera Metropolitana, 246, casella 148), translated by Van der Ploeg (1991, p. 41).

⁸ ASS, Diplomatico Opera Metropolitana, 1259/60 (20th February 1260), 309 (casella 148).

⁹ ASS, Diplomatico Opera della metropolitana, 1321/2 febbraio 17, n. 667, casella 654. Translation of Van der Ploeg (1991, p. 101).

¹⁰ ASS, Diplomatico Opera della metropolitana, 1321/2 febbraio 17, n. 667, casella 654. Translation of Van der Ploeg (1991, p. 101).

¹¹ ASS, Diplomatico Opera della metropolitana, 1321/2 febbraio 17, n. 671, casella 654. Translation by Van der Ploeg (1991, p. 103).

¹² ASS, Diplomatico Opera della metropolitana, 1321/2 febbraio 17, n. 671, casella 654. Translation of Van der Ploeg (1991, p. 103).

¹³ ASS, Consiglio Generale 125, fol. 18r-19r.

¹⁴ AOMS, 25(30), nr. 5. Our translation from vulgar.

¹⁵ ASS, Consiglio Generale 125, fol. 18r-19r (23 August 1339). Our translation from Latin.

¹⁶ AOMS, 25(30), n. 4, our translation from vulgar.

¹⁷ AOMS, 25(30), n. 4, our translation from vulgar.

¹⁸ AOMS, 25(30), n. 6.

¹⁹ The etymology of the word ‘definition’ is quite enlightening in understanding how an exclusive focus on spatial boundaries is reductive of the complexity of socio-material worlds. ‘Definition’ comes from Latin *finis*, i.e. boundary, and *de-*, i.e. ‘to be about’ but also ‘to deprive’. Hence every ‘de-*finition*’ (with the emphasis on the spatial act of categorically define of a topic, i.e. a *topos*, a space) is inescapably ‘de-defined’, that is, never fully spatially and categorically closed.